An Artist in Embryo

By GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

HOW destiny came to send such a delicate blossom to the home of the Clows, in all defiance of heredity of one of the many mysteries of life which will probably never be solved. As a mere baby his beauty was exceptional; his curving lips, his finely chiseled nose, his wide, clear blue eyes, his good, broad brow, his sunny hair, all marked him in such sharp contrast to the heavy-jowled and dull-eyed parents that even they themselves stood a bit in awe of him, and his mother's pride in his beauty was marred by a certain uneasiness that never entirely left her.

"Yes," she admitted with a regretful sigh, "he is purty, but I'm afraid he's 'most too purty for a boy."

"Kind o' weakly, too," Jim Clow would add with growing dissatisfaction.

With him, a boy was to be regarded as a distinct asset, valued exactly in proportion to his evidences of brawn; and he longed for sturdy sons for exactly the same reason that he cherished the lithe-limbed colts that scampered about in the brook meadow. In this he was to be disappointed, for, to the Clow farmhouse, perched down from the rocky roadside, there came no more sons or daughters, and the one boy, Henry, grew up in loneliness to develop within him that strange and dreaming fancy which made him of no apparent worth.

"He's lazy, that young 'un," Jim decided in profound disgust, while yet the child wore pinafores; and from that time on the father took up the burden of his cross with such patience as he might.

There was no denying that the boy was not at all like other children of the countryside.

"He jes' sets there, mopin' and lookin' in a hole and never says a word," his mother complained. "It jes' 'pears like he ain't got any git-up-an'-git to him at all."

And she was right. Many, many times, the little one sat behind the kitchen, looking, looking, and forming no words to mold his thought. What it was that he saw across the tiny valley not even he himself could have told, but he noted with rapt eagerness the passing of every fleecy cloud across the sky; he traced fanciful creatures in all its new formations, and his eye dwelt in keen pleasure upon the deep gradations of shade and color in them. He found calm delight, increasing with his years, in the changing hue of the sky itself. For him the great dome of heaven was not only blue, but it was a hundred blues—the blue of Winter and the blue of Summer, the blue of morning and the blue of evening, the blue of midday and the blue of night, with all the varying shades between. He found at the edge of the brook one day a flower so exactly matching that day's sky that, until its season was passed and it had ceased to bloom, he came to it every day to compare it, building with infinite pains a little enclosure about it that the cattle might not trample it; and an odd fancy came to him that some little fleck of that great, wonderful arch above had dropped straight down to grow and bloom for him.

To Jim Clow the farm was a barren and unlovely place, if in his mental grasp there were such things as loveliness and unloveliness. The road was high here, and the house was built upon the rocky hillside that sloped down from the highway, so that it should take up none of the more fertile room in the hollow below; while, beyond, the barren hills rose up again. Of the whole farm, scarcely more than one-third was productive, and because it was not all rich, loamy bottom-land, such as he could never hope to possess, the man despised it as his wife despised her house. At first the dwelling, long before Jim succeeded to it, had been but a cabin, down to which led a flight of roughly placed stone steps. As the earlier generations of Clows had needed more rooms they had added them one at a time, and upon that shelving ground each addition had been built at a slightly different level, so that in passing from any one part of the house to another part there were steps to go up or steps to go down, making this woman's day one of unending toil; and, while her child was still young, she became old from hard and unceasing labor.

To the boy, however, the farm was a paradise, and the brook, that was of value to the father only as it irrigated his fields and watered his cattle, was to the boy a perpetual delight. He knew and loved every one of its quiet little pools, its steep, noisy shallows, its swift, constricted channels, its sandy bottoms where the water widened out in thin, sparkling sheets, its every crook and bend, clear down to the creek into which, at the boundary of the farm, it emptied. At this point there formed a deep, slow basin, where leaves long and pointed dripped, touching their very tips in the water; and sometimes while he was watching, a stealthy snake would slip its thin black length down from the overhanging branches and glide away under the dark surface. If one lay here and gazed long into the depth, there were strange new colors, shifting and varying with the changing light; deep, deep blues and browns and even reds, down where the dim fishes moved.

He had a strange fancy about the brook, too. It was an old, old friend, but as it was always racing away to the rivers and the ocean, he felt that it was always a stranger as well as a friend. Every time that he saw it he felt that he must make its acquaintance all over again, for this was water that he had never seen before; so, while he was yet quite little, he used to say "Good morning" to it every day, and, lying down upon the bank with his face above it in his favorite spot, he would tell it all about himself, and about the clouds and the blue sky which it must have seen.

So the boy grew until he was thirteen, and his listless dreaming increased. Of course, he worked, as every creature upon that farm, whether two-footed or four-footed, must work, but he labored with a curious inefficiency that made Jim Clow heart-sick. He was a good father in a way, and a patient one, but sometimes, in striving to bring the boy into a proper relation with his duty toward life, he became brutal. It was all wasted. Trouble slipped from the boy's back as soon as it came. A thrashing made him remember to be steadfastly industrious for a time, but at the turn of a furrow some harmony of key-tone in earth and tree and hill and sky would impress him, and he would pause and marvel at this wonder of light and color, while his plow choked within the soil and the idle horses calmly thrashed their tails.

Color! Always and everywhere there was color, even in shadow and blackest night, and he grew to revel in it, seeing it keenly where others blindly saw but mist or sterile ground or grazing land, but fruitful trees or barren, but promises of fair weather or foul.

Thus Henry Clow might have lived and died and have become clay again, but in that blessed Summer came a stranger, one who, traveling idly through the country, saw this quaint little gray house with its many-times-broken roof, and its queer angles and its multiplicity of moss-grown stone steps, and saw also a hundred pictures in the valley below and the hills beyond and the winding creek. Mrs. Clow took him in eagerly. It meant more work, but it meant cash, and cash was the one article that her husband's farm would not produce.

Whatever fate it was that sent this new note into the life of the boy, that fate had selected kindly, for the stranger brought with him canvas and palette and brush and paint, and because he bought the services of young Henry to carry these things, a new heaven opened to the dreamer. The stranger was surprised to find that the boy in setting up his easel and stool for him would, himself, judge the view and shift these paraphernalia exactly to the point that the man would have chosen. Shy comment, too, the youngster offered; for instance, that a distant clump of trees which in evening mist was empurpled, was sometimes in the morning a tender blue "like that," as he picked it out upon the palette; that the trunks of the trees which, at that particular hour, ranged from velvet-black and brown to silver-gray, in certain lights and against certain colors appeared distinctly red of tone.

One whole month of this ecstasy was permitted the boy, a month in which before his worshipping eyes was wrought the magic of completed canvas; and then—the magician went away! Before he left he proffered a check in payment of his bill, but Jim Clow would have none of it. He had never handled a check in all his life, and it did not appeal to him. What he wanted to see was greenbacks and silver. The artist laughed.

"Very well," said he, "I'll go to town and get it for you," and in his buckboard the little pony that had brought him there, took him to the world again.

He did not come back, because he could not get his check cashed in the village, so he waited until he got to the city, and from there sent Jim a money order with a careful explanation of how to get it cashed. Unfortunately that letter went astray, and in the heart of Jim Clow there grew up a natural resentment against the whole tribe of artists. When Henry finding a discarded brush and squeezing out a scant supply of colors from the empty tubes the artist had left him, tried his halting hand at painting upon one of the smooth slaty stones with which the farm abounded, Jim Clow's patience turned to violent anger, and he fought this new development of the boy's worthlessness with bitterness; nor was it altered much when, after a long time, the money order came back to the artist, and he, contrite, made a special trip from the city to Jim Clow's place to pay the money.

The artist was big enough and broad enough to accept in meekness this injustice, for he was one of pitying heart who knew that not all God's children may have the larger gift of understanding, but before he went away he saw the flat stone with the crude daub upon it. It was a picture of the house as seen from the high bank on the opposite side of the road, and its drawing was rough and out of proportion, though it had some perspective. The colors, too, were raw, but one thing struck him most forcibly. The house itself was a weather-beaten gray, but it had been painted a delicate blue, "that" blue. The artist looked at the boy curiously.

"That is a queer color you gave the house," he said.

The boy flushed.

THEY WERE NEARING SIXTY NOW, AND THEY HAD JUST SEEN THEIR SUNSET!

"That's what father says, and he made fun of it," he replied, "but that's the way I have seen it along sometimes in the early mornings; that is, a good deal like that, only I didn't have any of the real color that it ought to be."

Again the artist looked musingly from the boy to the sketch and to the house. Instantly he could see such an early morning, one of those misty gray dawns in which, when the sun has just begun to struggle through, there comes for a few moments that strange, fleeting blueness of tint to pervade all distance and to swathe all objects. He talked but little further with the boy; mere conventional words of encouragement, and drove away in deep thought, though once he turned around to look again at the youngster where he stood in the middle of the road, gazing ruefully at his unfinished sketch. Henry thought that the artist was displeased in some way, and so he threw down the stone and broke it, then crept off behind the underbrush at the upper side of the road to bury himself for half a day in misery.

But after the lapse of a week there came a wonderful express package to the village for Henry Clow. In it were half a dozen stretched canvases, a block of sketching canvas, a palette, a palette-knife, a dazzling supply of paints and brushes. The materials were all cheap, but they were ample, and for the first time in his life the boy sturdily opposed and defied his father. In the face of scorn and ridicule, of fierce imprecation, and even of whippings, he persisted, until at last Jim Clow was forced to confess that the boy worked much better and more steadily about the farm, since by this alone could he hope to ward off the objection to his painting times. What painstaking study the youngster spent upon the coloring in meadow and woods and sky that, once so plain, seemed now so elusive, only those who have gone over the toilsome road may know; as only they, too, may understand how he hoarded paint and canvas as a miser does his gold, making each stroke count, and putting it down only after grave and earnest thought, until at last he began to force those evasive chromatic harmonies to come forth at his bidding.

It was three years after his first visit when the artist came again, and in an automobile now, for in those three years he, too, had worked, and success had crowned his efforts. His famous picture, "The Valley Farm," had been the start of it, and now, in a sort of impersonal gratitude to the first rung of his ladder, he journeyed out to see it. He had almost forgotten the boy, except as one of the minor incidents that went to make up the entire episode, but the boy had not forgotten him. He had mentally elevated the artist to an almost Olympian glory, and it was with the trembling timidity in which one might await the smile or the frown of a deity that he brought forth his canvases to show. One by one the artist picked them up and set them down, without comment but with growing interest, until by and by he came across one that startled him.

"Sunset" it was called, but such a sunset! Here was no flaming sky of reds and yellows, but an insensible gradation from the steel-blue of the zenith to a deep mauve in the interstices of the trees at the horizon—and that mauve tint was everywhere. It was almost a monochrome. Trees and shadows, atmosphere and foreground and distant silhouette, all earth and heaven displayed this key-note in varying depths and tints. There was crudeness in the drawing, the limbs of the trees were stiff and clumsy and at unnatural angles and the leaves were badly grouped—but the color! It was startling in its boldness, and yet, as one looked, and looked again, it resolved itself into a like landscape with a vibrant harmony, caught in one of those rare misty evenings when Nature herself had wrought in monochrome.

"Who has been touching you?" he asked the youth sharply.

"No one," replied the other in humbleness. "I wish they had."

"No one!" repeated the artist to himself. "But some One did."

Jim Clow stood in frowning disapproval at the kitchen steps, where the youth had led the way to show the view from which the painting had been made.

"I want to take your boy away with me," said the artist, and Henry's heart leaped into his throat. With trembling anxiety, a pain so keen that he thought he should swoon under it, he caught at the artist's coat and held to the hem of it as a man might to the spar that should save him from engulfment, while he waited in fearsome silence for what might follow.

"What for?" inquired the father.

"I want to educate him; to make an artist of him. A good man paid my way to such success as I have gained, and I can never pay him back, for he is dead. This is the only way in which I can make reimbursement, and I have set aside the sum that my years of training cost for just that purpose, waiting until I should find some one worth while. I have found him—here."

Jim shook his head.

"I can't spare Henry. He ain't much help, but he's some, an' if he was gone I'd have t' git a man 'round the place."

"I see," said the artist, frowning. "How much would such a man cost you?"

"Twenty dollars a month and his keep," responded Jim, figuring shrewdly.

"There would be no difference between his 'keep' and the boy's," the artist reminded him, "but the twenty dollars a month would amount to two hundred and forty dollars a year. Suppose we say two hundred, since I am sure that even that amount will allow you a generous margin. Will that satisfy you, if I pay the first two hundred dollars to you in advance?"

The light of cupidity leaped into Jim Clow's eyes.

"Cash?" he asked the question almost breathlessly.

"Cash," repeated the artist, and he then and there took from his pocketbook four crisp fifty-dollar bills.

For the first time the boy breathed deeply as Jim Clow silently took the money and passed it to his wife who stood in the doorway.

"I reckon it's for Henry's good," she hesitated, but she clasped the money with as much miserly eagerness as Jim had done.

And why not, since all their hard lives had been cramped and circumscribed by the lack of this very boon; since because of that lack their brows were wrinkled and careworn before their time and their hearts were heavy and dull and cold?

For the first time the artist seemed to notice that the youth still clutched the hem of his coat as if fearing to let him go.

"Get your clothes together, Henry," he directed kindly; "we shall start at once. I am loaning this money to your son," he added, turning to the father as Henry stumbled into the house, blinded by this wonderful good fortune, "and I have no fear but that he will be able to pay it back some day. Every three months after this first year I shall send you fifty dollars until he is able to send it to you himself."

After all, the Clows were not without their parental feeling, for twice before his boy left, Jim had almost taken back the bargain, and the mother, as she packed her son's belongings in the battered little canvas "telescope" that had done duty many years for the few trips the family had made, cried over them, and she wept and clung around his neck at the roadside and implored him to take care of himself, not to forget them, and to write to them "every once in a way."

Thus Henry Clow went out into the world to make for himself the place that he craved. There is no need to tell of all his struggles from obscurity to fame, nor how the rough places were smoothed over by the friend who had absorbed a trace of the largeness of God into his own soul. It is enough to say that he worked; that the laziness with which he had been charged existed no more; that he slaved night and day; that he bent to this heaven-sent task with all the energy and vigor that had been born of his years of longing, and that success did come in full measure.

Of course, he came back to the valley farm after his long sojourn abroad, and he came once a year after he had opened his studio in the distant city. And then began the curious development which makes this not at all the narrative of Henry Clow's dreams and struggles, but of Jim Clow and his wife.

The beginning was in that Summer when Henry painted "The Brook." During a preceding Winter one of his pictures had taken a prize and had been sold for a thousand dollars, and the Clows began for the first time to have a respect for Henry's work. Jim frequently paused in his labor that Summer to go behind his boy and watch with puzzled wonder the incomprehensible masses of color that appeared roughly here and there. The rudely outlined course of the brook had no perspective to him as yet, nor was his untrained eye able to carry field and rock and tree and hill to their relative places upon the picture. He noted with particular perplexity that just below the white and gray of the steep little tumbling shallows, there was a great oval section painted almost exactly like the sky above it—deep blue with splotches of blended white—and he could not understand it. It was all a jargon to him, but he came back to the canvas again and again, scratching his head; when the picture was done and Henry was putting some finishing touches to the foreground, he hurried to the house and got his wife. At last he saw the pool of clear, pellucid water reflecting the blue and white of the sky above it, and she must see it, too.

It was two Summers later that, when Henry came home, he handed to his mother a folded parchment. It was a deed for the broad acres of rich bottom-land just across on the other side of the creek into which the brook emptied—the very acres for which Jim had hopelessly longed all his life. Their appreciation of art took another bound. Why the money for this great purchase had been literally wrested from field and tree and hill and sky! Sometimes both the man and the woman found themselves pausing to look at these things as if they were startlingly new objects. They were growing old now, and this comfort and plenty with which Henry had provided them, brought a measure of peace and gentleness as well, just as it brought them an altered perspective of Henry himself.

"Why, when he was just a little shaver," Jim would mildly boast to the neighbors, "he used to set by the hour 'n' look at the clouds 'n' trees 'n' things! Course I 'lowed him ter hev paints 'n' brushes 'n' time to practise till he got to be what he is now."

"We allus know'd there was suthin' in Henry," Mrs. Clow would pridefully add, and they really believed it.

As the fame of the artist grew, so grew their pride in him and in his work. They even began to pay some attention to other pictures than Henry's; but the real bursting of the chrysalis came one Summer evening just after the boy—*their* boy—had gone back to New York. Jim was sitting on the kitchen steps, musing out across the valley, but scarce knowing the trend of his own thoughts, when the miracle happened and the scales fell from eyes that had been unseeing for a lifetime.

"Maggie, come out here!" he called softly, as one speaks when they fear that a baby may change its pose, or a rare bird may fly away.

Wondering at the awe in his tone she came, and he pulled her gently down beside him on the steps.

"Look!" he half-whispered, directing her gaze to the horizon. "Ef Henry c'd only see that, now!"

All the evening the western sky had hung low, full of tumbled and shredded dark-gray clouds, though just above the hilltops was a long, bare, clear space. Like a great, glowing crimson ball the sun dropped slowly across this narrow strip, from cloud-edge to horizon. As they looked, absorbed, fascinated, the scarlet glow blended in a transition to ruddy gold, and in the deeper recesses of the clouds, where blue-gray had acted as a foil for the bright red, came exquisite violet tints. Slowly the vast panorama of color went on; then suddenly, as if a light had been turned off, the color departed entirely from the underside of the clouds, leaving them dull and dark; but in the clear strip was left the melting tints of the afterglow.

Still the couple upon the kitchen steps sat, hand in hand, quiet and speechless, and they were sitting there still when the first pale star points began to gleam through the falling dusk, away yonder where the marvel had disappeared.

They were nearing sixty now, and they had just seen their first sunset!

NEXT WEEK: The Pride of the Camp

By Charles G. D. Roberts